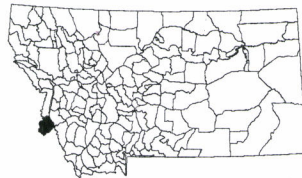


**WEST FORK EMU**  
**(Hunting District 250)**



**Description:** The West Fork EMU is a new EMU, separated from the area designated as the Sapphire EMU in 1992. This 707-square-mile EMU encompasses the West Fork of the Bitterroot River drainage. The Idaho state line bounds the west and south sides, Tin Cup Creek the north side, and U.S. Highway 93 is the east boundary. The USDA-Forest Service-Bitterroot National Forest (USFS-BNF) administers 94% of this EMU and the northwest portion is in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness Area. Just 5% of this EMU is private land. About half of the private land is near U.S. Highway 93 in the northeast part of the EMU and the remainder is in parcels along the West Fork of the Bitterroot and Nez Perce Creek.

Thirty-five percent or 250 square miles of the West Fork EMU is elk winter range with 14% of winter range private, and 86% public land. However, elk use private land winter range proportionately more than they do public land winter range. Thirty nine percent of elk observed on the spring 2002 survey were on the 14% of winter range that is privately owned.

Elk security is good to excellent because of the ruggedness of terrain, road closures, and roadless and wilderness areas.

**Public Access:** About half of this EMU is moderately roaded, offering good public access. Most roads are within 5 linear miles of the West Fork of the Bitterroot River. Beyond 5 miles of the river and to the Idaho border there are some relatively large blocks of roadless security areas

**Elk Populations:** Number of elk observed during spring fixed-wing aircraft flights in HD 250 averaged 497 from 1965 to 1983 (Figure 1). The elk population began increasing after about 1983, coinciding with more conservative antlerless harvests, and reached a high count of 1,703 in 2003. During 1999-2003, calf:100 cow and bull:100 cow ratios averaged 24:100 and 12:100, respectively.

The 1992 Elk Plan called for a 20-30% increase in observed elk in this EMU. Using the 1987-1991 average of 868 observed elk as a starting point, this objective would have

been met at 1,042-1,128 observed elk. The 1992 objective for numbers of elk observed was exceeded in 8 of 9 post-season surveys since 1994. Numbers of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys in 2003 were 51% over the objective of 1992.

**Recreation Provided:** This EMU provided an average of 10,574 days of hunting recreation for 1,519 hunters annually during 1999-2001. Viewing and photography make up the majority of elk-related recreation during summer.

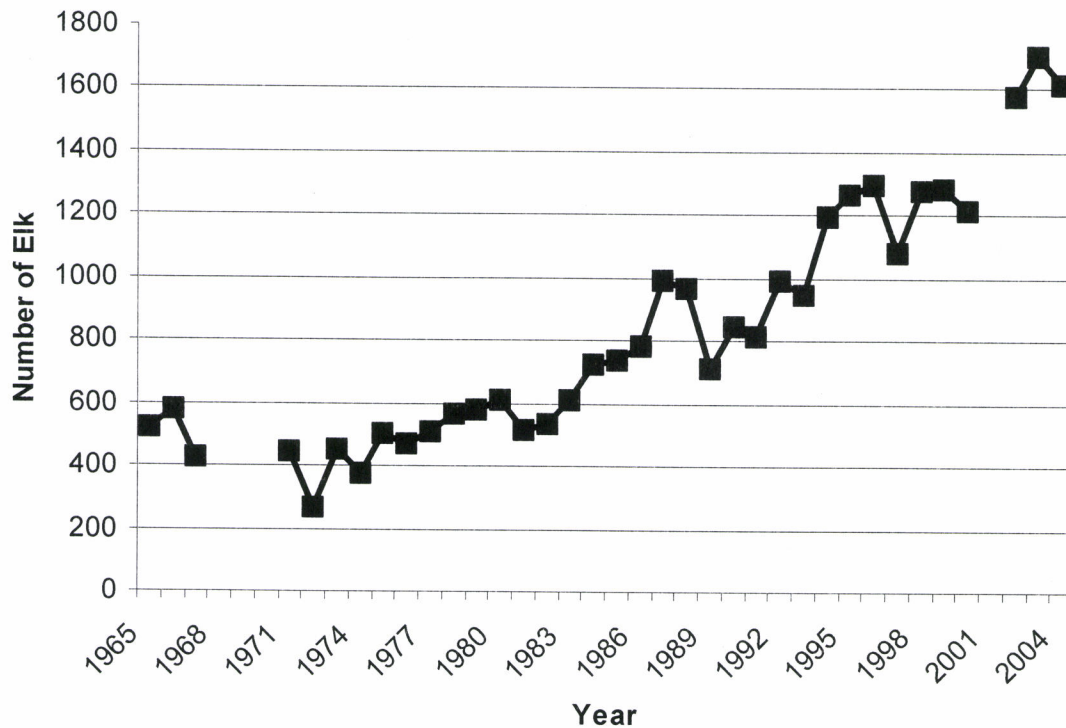


Figure 1. Numbers of elk observed during post-season fixed-wing aerial trend surveys in HD 250, 1965-2004.

**Current Annual Elk Harvest:** Average annual harvest during 1999-2001 was 130 elk, comprised of 84 (65%) bulls and 46 (35%) antlerless elk. Thirty five percent of bulls had at least one 6-point antler and 29% were harvested the first week of the general season. The harvest of antlerless elk during the same period averaged 50% (range 35-61%) of the number of A-7 licenses issued.

**Accomplishments:** FWP has assisted landowners who allow public hunting and have chronic elk damage problems with temporary and permanent hay stackyards, fencing materials, herding, and occasionally, kill permits.

The area around Bare Cone Ridge, previously closed to antlerless harvest, was opened for the 2003 season.



**Management Challenges:** Housing development on elk winter range is a management challenge in this EMU. For about the last 15 years Ravalli County has been one of the counties with greatest rate of increase in human population in Montana. Housing development on elk winter range affects elk management in 3 ways: 1) Physical loss of winter range including areas outside of home sites but within sight, sound and smell of people and the range of domestic pets, especially dogs; 2) Landowners may not allow hunting or access through their property thus limiting the ability to get an adequate harvest and; 3) The "refuge effect" created by limited access or harvest can concentrate elk and allow them to increase in number. This in turn can increase elk depredation on the immediate and surrounding properties.

Wolves restored to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 have since become established in this EMU. Currently, the Painted Rocks pack is the only pack known in this EMU. Wolves may have some impact on elk management in this EMU, but the kind and degree of impact is unknown at this time.

**Population Monitoring:** Annual fixed-wing aerial trend counts are conducted during early spring. Elk observed are recorded as bulls, cows, and calves to determine sex and age ratios.

## SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

In 1992, public comment indicated support for maintaining the current management goal of providing a diversity of hunting experiences and harvest opportunities. There was also interest in managing for more mature bulls in the Bitterroot portion of the unit, through additional road closures and more restrictive hunting regulations. Comments opposing additional road closures were also received. The public voiced strong support for establishing cooperative programs with public and private land managers to maintain and improve elk security throughout the unit.

Based on a proposal made by the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association that recommended an increase in elk numbers above FWP draft population objectives for the Bitterroot hunting districts (HDs 240, 250, 204, 261, 270), a Bitterroot Elk Management Working Group has been established in an attempt to reach consensus on elk population objectives in the Bitterroot. The group consists of representatives from the local business community, the Ravalli Co. Fish and Wildlife Assoc., Montana Bow Hunters Assoc., a local outfitter, landowners, Bitterroot National Forest, Safari Club International, and a timber consultant. Among other things, the group will discuss impacts on elk habitat from the extensive 2000 fires, explore innovative ways to minimize elk damage to agricultural producers, discuss the potential impact of predators (including wolves) on elk populations, and attempt to reach consensus on long term population management goals for the Bitterroot hunting districts.

Because of the fires of 2000 and their effects on elk habitat, there is interest in allowing elk populations to increase above the draft FWP objectives in HD 270. Some believe that FWP should reduce harvest of antlerless elk and work with landowners on a site-specific

basis if game damage occurs rather than implementing more liberal regulations. There was also concern about the potential impact of wolf predation on elk and hunting opportunity.

### **MANAGEMENT GOAL**

Manage the elk population in a healthy condition at 1,400 elk observed during spring aerial surveys and cooperate with public and private landowners in the management of elk habitat with emphasis on maintaining a diverse bull age structure.

### **HABITAT OBJECTIVES**

- 1) Participate in cooperative programs with public and private land managers that will maintain 452,506 acres of occupied elk habitat.
- 2) Maintain elk security so that elk harvest is distributed throughout the hunting season with no more than 30% of the bull harvest occurring during the first week of the general season.
- 3) Maintain and enhance the current amount of elk winter range.

### **HABITAT MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

FWP will:

- Provide technical assistance to county planning boards and commissions regarding impacts of housing development on important elk winter range. If limiting development is not possible, then provide input to mitigate the effects of development.
- Work toward conserving existing elk winter range through conservation easements.
- Provide technical assistance to the Bitterroot National Forest in the planning and design of timber sales and road management to maintain elk security areas and secure travel corridors. This is particularly important in remaining roadless areas and on and near winter ranges.

### **GAME DAMAGE STRATEGIES**

FWP will:

- Maintain observed elk numbers within plan objectives while targeting local wildlife depredation sites with game damage hunts, stack yard materials, and aversive conditioning for landowners who allow adequate public hunting access.
- Cooperate with public land managers to change activities/conditions on public lands that contribute to redistribution of wildlife onto private lands.
- Evaluate the number of A-7 licenses or antlerless permits allocated for the hunting district or portions thereof and redistribute as necessary to achieve desired harvest.
- Explore creative means to encourage landowners who currently do not allow hunting, to consider limited access for at least certain groups of hunters (e.g. youth, disabled).



- Encourage dialogue between landowners with differing land management strategies.

## **ACCESS STRATEGIES**

FWP will:

- Assist landowners with hunter management through establishment of walk-in areas or, where appropriate, actively pursue block management agreements.
- Identify desirable access points to public lands and provide recommendations to the appropriate land management authority (Access Montana Program).
- Pursue conservation easements on important elk ranges found on private land.
- Explore creative means to encourage landowners who currently do not allow hunting to open their lands to increase public access.

## **POPULATION OBJECTIVES**

Elk population objectives may change if the newly established Bitterroot Elk Management Working Group can reach a consensus.

- 1) Maintain numbers of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys within 20% of 1,400 elk (1,120-1,680 elk).
- 2) Maintain at least 10 bulls:100 cows observed during post-season aerial trend surveys.
- 3) Maintain an annual bull harvest composed of 100% BTBs, including at least 15% with 6 points or more on at least 1 antler.

## **POPULATION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

### **REGULATION PACKAGES**

Six-week brow-tined bull/antlerless archery regulation EXCEPT, see Restrictive Regulation for antlered elk.

#### **Antlerless:**

The Standard Regulation is: sufficient antlerless permits and A-7 licenses to achieve an annual harvest of 100 to 175 antlerless elk as number of elk observed vary within the objective range. Based on past harvest success of 50% of the number of licenses issued, this means issuing 200 to 350 A-7 licenses.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk counted during post-season aerial trend surveys is 1,120 – 1,680 AND, calf:100 cow ratios are at least 25 calves:100 cows.

The Liberal Regulation is: 1.) more than 350 A-7 licenses or antlerless permits or a combination of permits and specially directed A-7 licenses OR, 2.) brow-tined bull/antlerless

regulation for a portion (up to the full 5-weeks) of the general season AND, singly or in combination, A-7 licenses, antlerless permits, and A-9/B-12 antlerless licenses (B-tags).

**Liberal Regulation 1.) (above)** will be recommended if: the number of elk observed on post-season aerial trend surveys is more than 1,680 OR, the number of elk observed is 1,120-1,680 AND, calf:100 cow ratios are more than 30 calves:100 cows for 2 consecutive years.

**Liberal Regulation 2.) (above)** will be recommended if: after 2 years of application of Liberal Regulation 1.) (above), the number of elk observed on post-season aerial trend surveys remains more than 1,680.

A Liberal Regulation will be maintained until the number of elk counted during post-season aerial surveys is reduced to 1,400, at which time the Standard Regulation will be recommended.

**The Restrictive Regulation is:** no antlerless harvest if the most rapid population increase is desired OR, limited A-7 licenses or antlerless permits to result in an annual harvest of less than 100 antlerless elk (fewer than 200 licenses or permits).

The Restrictive Regulation will be recommended if: the number of elk observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is less than 1,120 for 2 consecutive years OR, the number of elk observed is less than 1,400 AND, calf:100 cow ratios are less than 25 calves:100 cows for 2 successive years.

A Restrictive Regulation will be maintained until the number of elk counted during post-season aerial surveys has increased to 1,400, at which time the Standard Regulation will be recommended.

#### **Antlered:**

**The Standard Regulation is:** 5-week general season brow-tined bull regulation.

The Standard Regulation will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is at least 10 bulls:100 cows AND, at least 15% of harvested bulls have 6 points or more on at least one antler.

**The Restrictive Regulation is:** 1.) unlimited brow-tined bull permits. 2.) limited antlered bull permits. ARCHERS WILL ALSO BE REQUIRED TO APPLY FOR UNLIMITED AND LIMITED PERMITS.

1.) Unlimited brow-tined bull permits will be recommended if: the bull:100 cow ratio observed during post-season aerial trend surveys is less than 10 bulls:100 cows for 2 consecutive years OR, less than 15% of harvested bulls have 6 points or more on at least one antler for 2 consecutive years.

2.) Limited antlered bull permits will be recommended if the bull:100 cow ratio remains below 10 bulls :100 cows OR, less than 15% of harvested bulls have 6 points or more on at least one antler after 2 years of application of unlimited permits.